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Thomas Sheridan and the Evil Ends of Writing

Two new biographies of the great dramatist and parliamentarian Richard Brinsley Sheridan have provoked a renewal of interest in the whole Sheridan dynasty.¹ In *A Traitor's Kiss* (1997), Fintan O' Toole occasionally discusses Thomas Sheridan's educational obsessions, but his sympathy for the son leads him to focus on the lackluster parenting skills of the father. In her life of Sheridan, Linda Kelly remarks of the dramatist's father that although "Thomas Sheridan's achievements had never been fully recognized in his lifetime. [. . .] Thomas Sheridan has his own claims on posterity."² These claims have yet to receive serious consideration, even by scholars of the eighteenth century.

Thomas Sheridan (1719–1788), son of the poet, father of the dramatist, husband of the novelist—as well as actor, stage manager, educational reformer, and public lecturer—passionately believed that speech was a higher and truer form of communication than writing, and understandably so, because he was the most influential elocutionist of his day. In his own lifetime, however, Thomas Sheridan was perhaps best known as one of the greatest tragic actors of the mid-eighteenth century. Charles Churchill's poem *The Rosciad*, a best-selling survey of contemporary (1760) acting talent, regards Sheridan as a flawed but fascinating touchstone of dramatic and rhetorical taste.

But, spite of all defects, his glories rise;
And Art, by Judgement form'd, with Nature vies.
[. . .]
Where he falls short 'tis Nature's fault alone;
Where he succeeds, the Merit's all his own.³

Sheridan is the penultimate player in Churchill's catalogue. Although the top prize goes, predictably enough, to David Garrick, Sheridan is revealed as a serious contender in this contest. Even more significantly, Churchill identifies a conflict between Art and Nature in Sheridan's rhetoric.

1. Fintan O' Toole, *A Traitor's Kiss: The Life of Richard Brinsley Sheridan* (London: Granta, 1997).

2. Linda Kelly, *Richard Brinsley Sheridan: A Life* (London: Sinclair-Stevenson, 1997), p. 154.

3. *The Poetical Works of Charles Churchill*, ed. by Douglas Grant (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956), p. 32, ll. 1019–21, 1025–26.

Thomas Sheridan was not, however, to be contained by the eighteenth-century stage. The reforms of the stage he implemented while manager of the Smock Alley Theatre in Dublin were part of a larger project to dignify and revivify the liberating power of the spoken word. Sheridan's eclectic ambition is typical of his age. The eighteenth century encouraged secular but "unscientific" interdisciplinary thought to an extent never seen before or since. Of the intellectual opportunities of the eighteenth century's transitional status, Jacques Derrida observed that "... neither Descartes nor Hegel grappled with the problem of writing. The place of this combat and crisis is called the eighteenth century."⁴ The terms of many modern deconstructive arguments about the nature and status of writing were fully operative more than two hundred years ago. Derrida appreciates a continuity of concern that links our own anxieties about language with those of the great eighteenth-century interdisciplinarians, principally Rousseau. The eighteenth century is also the time when the new science of anthropology reflects on the possibility that civilization itself may be spiritually impoverishing. Dominated but not delimited by Rousseau, eighteenth-century anthropology often isolates writing as the key denaturing device. As Derrida's discussion of the history of phonocentric ideology continues to reverberate, Sheridan deserves to be recognized alongside Adam Smith, Adam Ferguson, and ultimately Rousseau himself, not simply as an original theorist but as a uniquely persistent campaigner on behalf of an Enlightenment ideal.

Sheridan's privileging of oral over written communication was defined, delimited, and ultimately curtailed both by an idiosyncratic classical frame of reference, and by a determination—inherited from Dean Swift—to see individual and national self-determination as dependent on a rigorous definition of linguistic competence. Always, Sheridan talks of contemporary language in terms of decay and a "falling off":

... we are told that amongst the savages of North America, the spokesmen who come down with what is called a Talk to our governours, deliver themselves with great energy, untutored by any school-mistress but nature. But were these savages to be taught our written language by our masters, we should soon find them delivering themselves as ill as we do.⁵

4. Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1976), p. 98.

5. Thomas Sheridan, *A Course of Lectures on Elocution* (London, 1762), p. 175; hereafter cited parenthetically, thus: (*Lectures* 175).

Sheridan's writings investigate natural or authentic speech and considers how the blessings of such primal authenticity can be recreated. There is obviously no way back to the forest, any more than there is any useful prospect of modern Europeans being able to forget how to read and write. The only thing that can cure education is, it seems, more education. To effect this singular, circular refinement, moderns need to become conscious of what has happened to them. If they cannot be renatured, they can at least know how they have been denatured. Derrida comments on Rousseau's treatment of this same denaturing: "The Essay on the Origin of Languages opposes speech to writing as presence to absence and liberty to servitude [. . .] writing takes the status of a tragic fatality come to prey upon natural innocence, interrupting the golden age of the present and full speech."⁶

Throughout Sheridan's writing, the word is treated sacramentally: the word is always prior to, higher than, and fuller than, the text. Sheridan is a High Priest of phonocentrism. One might suppose that such a belief would lead him to respect orally transmitted literature, and in the most obvious sense, Sheridan certainly cherished primitive or "antique" poetry. In a well-known passage from Boswell's *London Journal* the extravagance of Sheridan's devotion to Ossian is noted:

Erskine came in, and he and Sheridan talked very well upon the poems of *Ossian*, whom Sheridan said he preferred to all the poets in the world, and thought he excelled Homer in the Sublime and Virgil in the Pathetic. He said Mrs Sheridan and he had fixed it as the standard of feeling, made it like a thermometer by which they could judge of the warmth of everybody's heart; and that they calculated beforehand in what degrees all their acquaintances would feel them, which answered exactly. (8 February 1763)⁷

Thomas and Mrs. Sheridan, however, were celebrating what they thought was a translation *Ossian* was an English, not a Gaelic, "thermometer" as far as they were concerned and they showed no interest in looking at any original text, let alone listening to any original bardic reciter. More generally, Sheridan's insistence on rhetorical correctness and uniformity had the effect of abolishing cultural difference at the very moment that it celebrated cultural antiquity. Orally-transmitted literature became idealized by Sheridan, and others, as it was being translated and standardized, thus destroying any hope that Sheridan might champion a truly indigenous Irish or Scottish literature.

6. Derrida, p. 168.

7. *Boswell's London Journal*, ed. by Frederick A. Pottle (London: Heinemann, 1950), p. 182.

Like many people of his time, Sheridan believed that language was a fusion of two elements: a superstructural language of differentiation, and a natural language of raw expression. In *British Education*, he observes: “By natural language I mean the inarticulate tones which nature herself has given to the passions and which are equally well understood by all persons of all nations.”⁸ Artificial language, both oral and written, is arbitrary, and makes sense only to those who know how any particular language works. Tonal language is a biologically pre-programmed repertoire of expressive noises and movements without which no human being could ever be intelligible to another. This model is never developed or expanded into any coherent theory, nor is a similar view by his contemporary, the great Aberdonian philosopher Thomas Reid. Sheridan elaborates on this theme occasionally as in *A View of the State of School Education* (1787): “Words make up the language of thought or ideas; the language of feeling or inward emotion, is composed of tones, looks, and gestures.”⁹ Reid’s sense of the impoverishing impact of artificial language is, if anything, even more extreme than Sheridan’s: “Abolish the use of articulate sounds and writing for a century, and every man would be a painter, an actor, and an orator”¹⁰—a bold claim, impossible to disprove, because impossible to test.

It is instructive to remember that Sheridan approached “natural language” from the perspective not of a theoretician, let alone of a philosopher, but of an experienced actor-manager. Sheridan’s theatrical career has been exhaustively charted by Esther Sheldon in *Thomas Sheridan of Smock-Alley* (1967). Throughout his life, insists Sheldon, Sheridan was eager to assert that acting was a valid and respectable career choice—a vocation to be proud of. Sheldon rightly argues that the real importance of the Kelly Theatre Riots in Dublin in 1747 was that “Sheridan by his affirmation and by his behaviour too—had shown that a gentleman could be an actor and still remain a gentleman.”¹¹ Sheridan’s

8. Thomas Sheridan, *British Education, or, the source of all the disorders of Great Britain being an essay towards proving, that the immorality, ignorance, and false taste, which so generally prevails, are the natural and necessary consequence of the present defective system of education* (London: Printed for R. and J. Dodsley, 1756), p. 317; hereafter cited parenthetically, thus: (*British Education* 317).

9. Thomas Sheridan, *A View of the State of School Education in Ireland* (Dublin: Printed by M. Mills, 1787), p. 000; hereafter cited parenthetically, thus: (*View* 000).

10. Thomas Reid, *An Inquiry into the Human Mind, on the Principles of Common Sense* (Edinburgh: Printed for A. Kincaid and J. Bell, 1764), p. 109.

11. Esther Sheldon, *Thomas Sheridan of Smock Alley, Recording His Life as an Actor and Theatre Manager in both Dublin and London; and including a Smock-Alley Calendar for the Years of his Management* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), p. 104. The Kelly Theatre Riots occurred as a result of Sheridan’s disciplining and expulsion of a drunken, abusive and sexually threatening “gentleman” from his theater. Ensuing debates and pamphlets focused on the question as to whether an actor could be a gentleman, or should remain a mere servant, dependant on the whim of the genteel part of the audience.

strangely intertwined concern for dignity of stage and pulpit led to his being accused of being anticlerical. Attacks on poor preachers, coming from a player, were regarded in the eighteenth century as impudent to the point of impiety. Sheridan remained doggedly impenitent and urgent about these attacks, however, arguing in his *Lectures on Elocution* (1762) that, when something as important as preaching is concerned, self-regulation by the clergy cannot be permitted. Sheridan retells a famous theatrical anecdote to explain his point:

This it was which Betterton meant by his reply to the Bishop of London; who, asking him on a certain occasion, 'what could be the reason, that whole audiences should be moved to tears, and have all sorts of passions excited, at the representation of some story on the stage, which they knew to be feigned, and in the event of which, they were not at all concerned; yet that the same persons, should sit so utterly unmoved, at discourses from the pulpit, upon subjects of the utmost importance to them, relative not only to their temporal, but their eternal interests? He received from Betterton this memorable reply; 'My Lord, it is because we are in earnest.'

(*Lectures* 127)

Sheridan does not intend either to mock or to celebrate the impiety of clerics or actors with this anecdote. He tells the story because he believes that the decline of the pulpit—and therefore the decline of Christianity itself—is fundamentally a failure of oratorical technique. Actors are professionally compelled to act “in earnest” in a way that clerics, shamefully, are not. Because theatrical representation is feigned, it is all the more urgently and carefully delivered. The truths of the Gospel, meanwhile, are taken for granted, and are therefore half-heartedly expounded. Clerics do not practice expressing what they believe. Christians, once civilized, can no longer act naturally, and they need therefore to learn how to act.

Sheridan regards acting, like preaching, as the disciplining and focusing of emotion by means of concentration and hard practice. No Stanislavski, Sheridan does not recommend cathartic emotional retrieval as a means of revivifying speech. In the postlapsarian denatured world that Europeans are forced to inhabit, there can be no substitute for the closely organized, rehearsal of the proper stresses, pauses, and accents of any speech that has to be delivered. Sheridan insists that rhetoric is ultimately a matter of carefully “unlearning” false habits, and only then letting nature take its course. Oratory is not amplified or inflated speech, but speech fully realized—speech in tune with the totality and the subtlety of the message it carries. Oratory can only be reclaimed if people are reminded time and time again that speech is primary, and writing secondary. Man made the letter, but God made the word:

WHEN therefore we reflect, that not only every thing which is pleasurable, every thing which is forcible and affecting in utterance, but also the most material

points necessary to a full and distinct apprehension, even of the sense of what is uttered, depend upon tones; it may well astonish us to think, that so essential a part of language, should in a civilised country be wholly neglected. [. . .] And how can it be otherwise, when we have given up the vivifying, energetic language, stamped by God himself upon our natures, for that which is the cold and lifeless work of art, and invention of man?, and bartered that which can penetrate the inmost recesses of the heart, for one which dies in the ear, or fade on the sight. (Lectures 170–1)

Sheridan fails to square up to the real contradiction here. How are we to refine innocence? How can we “civilize” our way back to a state of pious nature? “Civilised country” is a tantalizingly odd phrase in the context of Sheridan’s preferred or habitual rant for it would seem that civilized language is chiefly to blame for our expressive impoverishment. What can civilization mean if not the consolidation of arts and inventions? The fact that this problem survives unresolved within a single rhetorical moment is part of what makes Sheridan revealingly representative of the tension between Art and Nature so central to any discussion of eighteenth-century thought.

Sheridan prefers repetitive exhortation to any systematic analysis: his arguments are punctuated by polemical urgency rather than logical causality. This can make him very frustrating to read in bulk. Most of Sheridan’s important thinking is contained in *British Education* (1756). He inserts sections from this work, quoting from it almost verbatim, in most of his subsequent books. Any significant variations on his one big idea arrive suddenly and without warning in the middle of what becomes frankly tedious restatement of his case. Sheridan’s most suggestive flights of fancy surround his favorite rhetorical opposition between warm breath and cold print: “. . . some of our greatest men have been trying to do that with the pen, which can only be performed by the tongue; to produce effects by the dead letter, which can never be produced but by the living voice, with its accompaniments” (Lectures xii).

Sheridan’s intended point is always that speech is the breath of life. Writing is inevitably moribund, its “pastness” precludes its entertaining any *vital* semantic equivalence. The “accompaniments” are the natural tones and gestures that any good actor will accumulate and refine. All sincere persuaders are automatically good actors, unless their natural communicative abilities have been vitiated by false taste and declamatory formalism. Good acting therefore precedes the most basic processes of grammar and syntax: “. . . the man who considers language in its primary state and noblest state, as offered to the ear, will find that the very life and soul of speech, consists in what is utterly unnoticed in writing, in accent and emphasis” (Lectures 71).

Ironically, however scathing he may be about the effects of writing, Sheridan is quite enthusiastic about the possible effects of print. Print technology represents the surest means of enforcing a uniform guide to pronunciation and, thus, revivifying the spoken word. Sheridan's own "Pronunciation Dictionary," the first of its kind, was to be the great weapon in this fight to standardize and therefore energize again the spoken word. Dr. Johnson, *the* great lexicographer, slighted this new book's potential. Modern readers may be inclined to agree with Johnson's scepticism regarding Sheridan's dictionary, even if they dislike his casual prejudice:

Sheridan's dictionary may do very well, but you cannot always carry it about with you: and, when you want the word, you have not the dictionary. It is like a man who has a sword that will not draw. It is an admirable sword, to be sure: but while your enemy is cutting your throat, you are unable to use it. Besides, Sir, what entitles Sheridan to fix the pronunciation of English? He has, in the first place, the disadvantage of being an Irishman: and if he says he will fix it after the best company, why they differ among themselves.¹²

Fixing the standard of pronunciation is the real challenge. Sheridan looks to an ideal rather than to any actual, exemplary speaker of English or to "the best company." Sheridan does not have any scientific basis for the supremacy of his own version of received pronunciation. It is known that he favored some eccentric and archaic pronunciations—all of which failed to catch on—usually for quite interesting poetic reasons. The ideal speaker is tested and proven by verse. When Sheridan is not talking about oratory, he is talking about poetry as oratory:

Nothing has contributed so much to destroy all true taste for poetry as the establishment of rhyme. A foolish admiration of this trifling and artificial ornament has turned people's thoughts from the contemplation of the real and natural of numbers. Like the Israelites, we have gone whoring after our own fancies and worshipped this idol with so infatuated a zeal, that our language has in a great measure fallen a sacrifice to it. (*British Education* 210)

This sort of biblical denigration of rhyme was becoming more and more widespread by the 1750s. Edward Young made a similar point a few years later in 1759, again using biblical rhetoric to enforce an alliance between blank verse and spiritual freedom. Young celebrated blank verse as "verse unfallen, uncurst; verse

12. James Boswell, *The Life of Samuel Johnson, LL.D.* (London: Dent, 1949), I: 418. Boswell later noted (I: 628) that Johnson never entirely freed himself of his native Staffordshire accent. Johnson's habitual pronunciation of English would have differed considerably from Sheridan's ideal.

reclaimed, re-enthroned in the true language of the gods."¹³ Blank verse is where humanity originated. Unsurprisingly, Milton is the greatest of poets as far as Sheridan and Young are concerned. There can be no easy way back to Edenic pastoral poetry, but Milton, while reconstructing Eden had developed a prelapsarian degree of freedom at the level of meter and syntax. Milton's bold libertarianism is best represented by his numbers rather than his invention or argument. Perhaps the ultimate paradox is that, in the absence of any real representation of ideal speech, Sheridan was forced to refer back to suggestive texts in order to determine the measure rhetorical plenitude.

Like Milton, Sheridan saw the freedom of unfettered speech in a larger context. Early on in his *Lectures on Elocution* (1762) Sheridan makes explicit a suggestively devastating link between speech and class power.

... as good pronunciation is no where methodically taught, and can be acquired only by conversing with people in polite life, it is a sort of proof that a person has kept good company, and on that account is sought after by all who wish to be connected as fashionable people in the *beau monde*. (Lectures 30)

The reason why received pronunciation is not taught is that *not* teaching it helps to naturalize and thus make inevitable the discourse of the ruling classes. Logically, therefore, the very teaching of pronunciation ought to threaten to expose the artifice and the facility with which received pronunciation may be constructed, thus throwing open the door to meritocratic invasion—to an army of eighteenth-century Eliza Doolittles, so to speak. Adopting the speech of an oppressor nation or an oppressor class may be a succumbing to an alien imperial identity, but it may also be a literal and metaphorical speaking on equal terms. Further, whether or not Sheridan was aware of or sympathetic to such a meritocratic revolution is less important than the practical assistance he gave it.¹⁴

Even more suggestively, the fact that linguistic competence can be made available to all illustrates the arbitrary nature of any received pronunciation, which is the very the opposite of Sheridan's stated intention. Any theory that suggests that a particular form of speech is within any determined person's grasp, ultimately weakens the claims of that form of speech to represent innate worth. Again, this pushes the conclusions of Sheridan's projects way beyond anything he could have wished for. Sheridan always seeks to stabilize govern-

13. Edward Young, *Conjectures on Original Composition*, ed. E. J. Morley (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1918), p. 27.

14. Fintan O'Toole observes that Thomas Sheridan's system of standardised speech could transform the Scottish lawyer, Alexander Wedderburne, into the British Lord Chancellor, Loughborough." O'Toole, p. 122.

ment on a broader base, ignoring or occluding the truly radical potential of educational reform, while carelessly dispensing libertarian rhetoric.

Sheridan's one persistent message is that oratory should be extensively taught, because civic freedom depends on the persuasive strength of the spoken word. Greece and Rome rose and fell as free civilizations along with the rise and fall of oratory. A free nation is governed by those who persuade rather than compel, and the best persuaders are always the people who can emote most truthfully. Sheridan's moralistic campaign for a uniform British linguistic identity was well timed to respond to a sense of national crisis. *British Education* is full of portentous claims for the urgency of moral renewal. During the Seven Years War, which broke out in 1756, the question of moral rearmament frequently took on a frantic edge. The most famous hysterical prophet of the age was John "Estimate" Brown whose jeremiad *An Estimate of the Manners and Principles of the Times* (1757) foresaw military defeat at the hands of France as the inevitable result of the reigning degenerate effeminacy of the ruling classes.¹⁵ Although he shared much of Brown's analysis and all of his sense of foreboding, Sheridan took issue with Brown, arguing that the reigning vice of the age is not effeminacy but selfishness. The only thing that can cure selfishness on a national scale is—predictably enough—better oratory. Silent solitary reading has encouraged a silent asocial mode of living. Reading out loud, like oratorical persuasion, is an inherently sociable project and therefore essential for any sort of collective purpose or spirit, national or otherwise. A prerequisite for a sense of the common good is, therefore, a common speech:

The consequence of teaching children by one method, and one uniform system of rules would be an uniformity of pronunciation in all so instructed. Thus might the rising generation, born and bred in different countries, no longer have a variety of dialects, but as subjects of one king, like sons of one father, have one common tongue. All natives of these realms would be restored to their birth right in commonage of language, which has been too long fenced in, and made the property of a few. And foreigners would no longer be inhospitably shut out, from a communication with in an article so essentially necessary to the keeping up a social intercourse with us. (Lectures 261–62)

The struggle to assert the prerogatives of the idea of a nation of Ireland in the eighteenth century is equated here with the struggle to become fully and unambiguously British. Like Swift and Goldsmith, Sheridan has a habit of appealing to the king as a common father who must redress the unequal treatment of his three children—England, Scotland, and Ireland. Sheridan had been

15. Brown, like Sheridan, argued for a national scheme of educational reform. Brown also treated oratory as an index of a free and stable society.

granted a pension by George III, which arguably makes this appeal more obvious, but he certainly did on occasion look forward to a form of dissolution of national identities among the Anglophones. Equal treatment and equality of opportunity for Ireland would come about only when the visible and, more importantly, audible signs of difference were erased. In response to the carplings of Johnson and others, Sheridan often pointed out that most English people could hardly speak the language any better than most Irish people. The state of the language being discarded, “there will be no occasion to wonder, that we [the British] should be the most unsettled in our notions, and the most divided in our opinions, of any people upon earth” (*Views* 38).

Sheridan’s greatest successes were neither in England nor Ireland but in Scotland, because this competitive assimilationist tendency was usually much stronger in Scotland, and because the speech of the Scottish upwardly mobile classes proved quite impenetrable in London. Sheridan’s Scottish lecture series in 1761 coincided not only with the high-water mark of the Scottish Enlightenment, but also with the more specific mood of national optimism and ambition soon confirmed by the appointment of the earl of Bute as prime minister. Sheridan’s contacts in Scotland included Hugh Blair, Henry Hume Lord Kames, and Adam Smith—all polymaths who are traditionally credited with the invention of English literature as a subject of serious philosophical study. Sheridan’s construction of a normative pronunciation was based largely on *literary* resonance and his own idea of received pronunciation existed to be tested on Milton and Shakespeare. The “Attic Evenings” that Sheridan staged in later life, were celebratory symposia of the spoken word: music, recitation, and lecture were combined to try and pay tribute to the power of the word, in all its correctly focused plenitude. As events, they were intended to be educative as well as entertaining—and personally remunerative.

Sheridan’s passionate concern for a well-managed stage persisted throughout his life. Sheldon plausibly asserts that theater was his true love, and elocution was secondary. William Benzie equally plausibly treats elocution as central, and theatre as marginal.¹⁶ In fact, theater and education were part of Sheridan’s complex obsession with the word, and it was Dublin society’s alarmist understanding of the proposed connection of the stage and the classroom that did much to derail Sheridan’s own proposals for a National Academy. The idea that the theater could teach the established church a thing or two about education and about preaching proved especially offensive. Returning to acting means returning to accent and emphasis. Language is acting, as far as Sheridan is

16. William Benzie, *The Dublin Orator: Thomas Sheridan’s Influence on Eighteenth-Century Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* (Menston, Yorkshire: Scolar Press, 1972).

concerned, because language is speech and speech is performance. Unsurprisingly, Sheridan the actor was regarded as verbally unchallengeable, although Garrick was held to have the more complete physical presence. Always, Sheridan restates the fact that language conveys meaning only through proper delivery: “Sound is the essence of letters, articulation of syllables, accents of words, and collections of words united by emphasis and divided by proper pauses” (*Lectures* 53). Accent makes words out of mere syllables, and emphasis makes sentences out of mere words (*Lectures* 45). Reclaiming semantic fullness is a theatrical process, and a hard-won emotional correctness that is the product of hard-fought unlearning—a step by step return to the phrasing and cadencing God intended. Acting may be about naturalism, but true naturalism in any language always makes for corrective uniformity. Speech should not be cadenced by any culture or context other than what is always latent in the very nature of the words.

George Taylor has argued that eighteenth-century theorists of drama, including Sheridan, constructed theatrical “truthfulness” in terms of passionate moments rather than passionate progression: “What I think this interpretation of behaviour also explains, is the practice of eighteenth-century actors of making isolated and individual points, rather than seeking the overall development of the character.”¹⁷ The event, rather than the individual, dictates the requisite emotional pitch. Taylor’s analysis reinforces Sheridan’s pedagogic imperative that the English language has just one optimally correct and complete expression of emotion that only one pronunciation and delivery can release. Only the theatre possesses the practical skills needed to reclaim that exactitude of language, just as only the theater can refocus Irish cultural life:

It has been allowed on all hands that one of the greatest evils under which this poor country labours, is the number of absentees; and what more likely means to continue and increase this evil, than the neglect of furnishing public amusements? What man of independent fortune will stay in a place where he can have no entertainment but what is merely sensual.¹⁸

Absenteeism continues to deprive Ireland of political leadership and national prestige. A state-supported theater is, argues Sheridan, the surest means of creating a cultural life and cultural identity for Ireland. A national theater will have a centripetal effect: it will center the central people within their own country,

17. George Taylor, “‘The Just Delineation of the Passions’: Theories of Acting in the Age of Garrick,” in *The Eighteenth Century Stage*, ed. Kenneth Richards, Peter Thomson (London: Methuen, 1972), p. 60.

18. *Mr Sheridan’s Speech, Addressed to a Number of Gentlemen Assembled with a View of considering the best Means to establish one good Theatre in this City* (Dublin, 1772), p. 18.

dissuading them from patronizing the London season. Of course the problem of how to take public money without being publicly accountable was not satisfactorily resolved. In truth, Sheridan demanded neither a self-regulated nor a state-regulated theater but a Sheridan-regulated theater, the state enforcement of Sheridan's own concept of theatrical dignity.

Thomas Sheridan may appear to posterity the ultimate assimilationist, a West Briton who found fame teaching North Britons to speak like South Britons. But Sheridan's assimilationist patriotism, like Swift's, can be adapted and appropriated by a radically different agenda. While looking to achieve equality of speech under the British crown, specifically Irish rights and aspirations are inevitably highlighted. Extending opportunity and extending participation within British political life might ultimately serve to expand the range of choices available within Irish political and cultural life. Robert Mahony's recent study of Swift's posthumous reputation, *Jonathan Swift: The Irish Identity* (1995), shows how variously Swift has been invoked, adapted, and occasionally distorted by generations of Irish men and women, from the very moment of his death up until the present day.¹⁹ Mahony rightly makes much of the fact that Sheridan dedicated his own edition of Swift's *Works* to Henry Grattan. Sheridan, perhaps justifiably, represents himself as a bridge between the achievements of Swift and Grattan, a faithful prophet of Irish rhetorical self-confidence. The sheer prestige of someone like Grattan represents a vindication of everything Sheridan had always stood for, someone famous for wielding power neither with the sword nor the pen but the tongue. Sheridan's weighty *Life of Swift* (1785) meanwhile tells the story of a patriot whose writings had the effect of speech. Swift, despite his own obsession with pronunciation, was of course a pen-bound persuader. Sheridan, typically, reads the *Drapier's Letters* as orations:

Nor were the effects produced by the Orations of Demosthenes on the Athenians, though set off with all the advantages of a most powerful elocution, greater than what followed from the silent pen of Swift, for in a nation made up of the most discordant materials, who never before agreed in any one point, he produced such a unanimity, that English and Irish, Protestant, Presbyterian, and Papist, spoke the same language, and had but one voice.²⁰

"Silent pen" is a phrase Sheridan also uses in the *View of Education*. In the context of Swift, the silence of the pen is, for once, paradoxical and short-lived.

19. Robert Mahony, *The Legacy of Swift* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995).

20. *Life of Swift*, p. 241.

The ends of writing are not evil, if they promote speech, bold, honest, and unifying speech.

Sheridan's obsession with oratory seemed a marginal occupation to many in the eighteenth century, and may seem marginal to many modern readers, but the story of the developing cultural and political authority of any individual or community cannot be disentangled from the story of that individual's or community's sense of linguistic authority. Much of the same case that is made for Swift as a great but exasperating Irish patriot can be made for Swift's protégé, Thomas Sheridan the Younger, whose contribution to both British and Irish culture has been far more discreet than the Dean's but which has been, nonetheless, surprisingly deep and pervasive.

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